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ABSTRACT

An accountability system is proposed for the education system in Washington. Reform efforts in Washington have been designed to create a school-centered system in which state standards motivate teachers, parents, and principals to search for more effective ways to help students learn. Drawing on the experience of other states, recommendations are made for a statewide accountability system that will: (1) promote school-level instructional improvement by eliminating compliance-oriented rules and regulations and transferring real-dollar resources to schools; (2) stimulate creation of a range of public and private assistance sources; (3) measure and report real, unadjusted student achievement scores; (4) empower local school districts to classify schools, reward success at the local level, work with struggling schools, and reconstitute schools that consistently fail their students; (5) re-align the responsibilities of existing state agencies; (6) create a new State Accountability Commission to review school district progress toward the state standards; and (7) allow teachers and principals to hold students accountable for diligent effort and reasonable behavior. The proposed accountability system meets the standard that all education reform efforts must meet, that of being serious enough to make real measures of student performance, assign clear responsibilities to all actors, and acknowledge the connections between educators' efforts and student achievement. (Contains two figures, two tables, and seven references.) An appendix reviews five state accountability designs. (SLD)

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UW/RAND
Center on Reinventing Public Education

Toward a K-12 Education Accountability System in Washington State

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December, 1997

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PREFACE

Washington State's 1993 Education Reform Act, ESHB 1209, requires the state to create an accountability system to support the achievement of the state's new academic standards for K-12 education.

Many equate accountability with student testing and publication of results. Those are necessary but not sufficient elements of accountability. Accountability is a process leading to improvements in schools and to student learning. A good accountability system creates incentives for success and disincentives for failure. It makes clear who is responsible for what and to whom. Ultimately, it ensures that no child is forced to attend a failed school.

Accountability for performance represents a shift in focus from inputs to the result of the educational process -- what our children know and can demonstrate. In the past, government has tried to hold schools accountable by regulating inputs: hours of instruction, student-teacher ratios, days in the school year. But despite years of efforts to improve schools by regulation, we have never had any effective way of ensuring that students were reaching their potential. Standards-based reform rejects the idea that the state can ensure good performance by regulating inputs or by dictating how students should be taught. It provides clear guidance about what students need to learn, relies on the initiative and expertise of teachers, principals, parents, and local school board members, and provides a safety net for children in failed schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The reform of Washington's education system started with establishing statewide goals, student-performance standards, and examinations designed to measure student performance against the standards. However, Washington's 1993 Education Reform Act, ESHB 1209, calls for more than standard-setting and testing. It envisions a series of changes in public education --in the ways schools are financed and the rules that govern them -- that will lead to widespread increases in student achievement.

The goal of an accountability system is better schools. Washington's reform is meant to create a school-centered system, in which state standards motivate teachers, parents, and principals to search for more effective ways to help students learn. When the Legislature passed the 1993 Reform Act, it recognized that standards and tests create change only when they are part of a larger accountability system that creates strong incentives to transform schools into effective learning organizations.

An accountability system must accomplish three tasks. It must attach consequences to performance so schools have strong incentives to improve instruction; create opportunities for principals and teachers to improve instruction by selecting staff and curricula; and ensure that schools can get the help they need to improve, by encouraging formation of many different high-quality assistance providers.

Because other states have also tried to create accountability systems based on these principles, we tried to take advantage of what others have learned. Experience suggests:

- Locate freedom of action and responsibility at the school level
- Make sure struggling schools can get help
- Create a strong role for local school boards
- Report direct measures of student learning
- Look beneath the numbers to judge what should be done about low-performing schools
- Provide an external check on the public school bureaucracy to serve as a safety net for children in schools that cannot improve

Based on these lessons we recommend a statewide accountability system that will:

1. **Promote school-level instructional improvement by eliminating compliance-oriented rules and regulations and transferring real-dollar resources to schools.**
2. **Stimulate creation of a range of public and private assistance sources so that schools can find the kinds of help they need.**
3. **Measure and report real, unadjusted student achievement scores.**

4. **Empower local school districts to classify schools, reward success at the local level, work closely with struggling schools, and reconstitute schools that consistently fail their students.**

5. **Re-align the responsibilities of existing state agencies. The SPI will have new powers and responsibilities, including reconstitution of consistently failing local school districts.**

6. **Create a new, independent State Accountability Commission, appointed by the governor, with authority to review school districts' progress in achieving Essential Learning Standards and to recommend reconstitution of schools and of entire school districts that prove unable or unwilling to improve their schools.**

7. **Allow teachers and principals to hold students accountable for diligent effort and reasonable behavior.**

We propose a system that doesn't stop until every child is in a good school; a system in which the whole community, including business and private sector assistance providers, has a role in improving Washington's schools. Washingtonians should accept nothing less. This is not an accountability system in which state and district officials make the rules, leaving schools and teachers to face the consequences. In the system we have proposed, schools will have the opportunity to improve and school districts will have the opportunity to help them. Adults, however, will be held accountable for making good use of these opportunities. Teachers, principals, and school boards can lose control of their schools, and of the money necessary to run them, if they cannot help students meet state learning standards.

Educators will rightly ask how the state accountability system holds accountable others whose efforts determine whether schools succeed — teachers, parents, and students. The answer is contained in the arrangements for school flexibility. Schools must be free to hire teachers who have the skills necessary to help improve the school, and who will cooperate with the school's improvement strategies. Schools must also be free to tell students and parents what kinds of effort, attendance, and behavior are necessary to succeed in the school.

The proposed accountability system meets the standard that all education reform efforts must meet, the "Are we serious test?": Are we serious enough to make public real measures of student performance, free of adjustments that shield some schools and school districts from embarrassment? Are we serious enough to create a system in which all actors have clear responsibilities and no one can shrink from acknowledging the connections between their efforts and student achievement?

I. An Overview Of Accountability Issues

A Performance-Based Accountability System Must

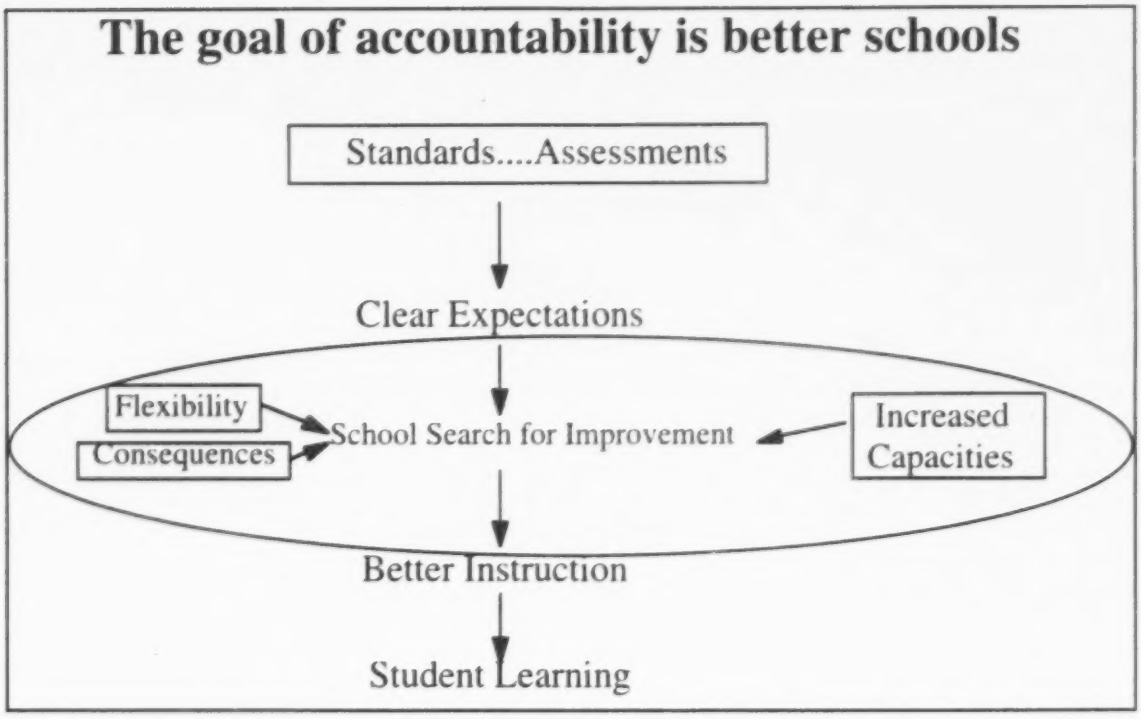
- Change what we hold the schools and the system accountable for
- Create a new incentive structure
- Clarify roles and responsibilities

In the past, government has tried to hold schools accountable by regulating inputs: hours of instruction, student-teacher ratios, days in the school year. But despite hundreds of new laws and regulations over the years, we have never had any effective way of ensuring that students were reaching their potential. Currently, there are no consistent links between performance data and corrective action; schools are accountable for compliance, not results; educators' job security does not depend on performance improvement; school boards do not always take responsibility for school failures; and failing schools are difficult to transform and seldom replaced.

Many people equate accountability with student testing and reporting. Those are necessary, but not sufficient elements of an accountability system. Accountability is a process linked to how schools perform and how children learn. It is triggered by an assessment of how children are doing, and measurement leads to action. A good accountability system creates incentives for success and disincentives for failure. By making clear who is responsible for what and to whom, it clarifies roles and responsibilities. While accountability to government is essential, the school system must first be responsive to the needs of students, parents, and the community.

With passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act, ESHB 1209, the state laid out a plan for creating statewide performance goals, measuring student performance, providing assistance for schools to improve, and creating consequences for results. New standards have been developed by the Commission on Student Learning. New assessments are in development. Accountability is the linchpin that will hold the new system together.

Figure 1



This diagram summarizes the "theory of action" that links statewide standards and assessments to school improvement and student learning. Clear statewide standards for student learning, and assessments designed to assess every student's and school's progress, create a climate of high expectations.

The circled section of the diagram represents accountability. Schools are motivated to search for ways to improve instruction, both by the existence of the state standards and by consequences -- rewards for high performance and sanctions against continued low performance -- attached to the state assessments. School-level improvement-efforts and problem-solving are also aided by removal of unnecessary regulation and by making available help that responds to individual schools' specific needs. Schools consequently adopt improved instructional methods and focus all their attention on student learning, so that student learning improves continuously.

School level initiative is the engine of reform. Schools must be empowered to create effective instructional strategies. Other parts of the system, including the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and local school districts, must take on new missions and abandon old ones to ensure that schools can and will improve instruction and student learning.

To date, much of the action has been at the state level, with the Commission on Student Learning working with educators, parents, and community members to develop standards and ways of measuring student achievement against the standards. The initiative now must shift to localities and individual schools. However, standards and new tests are not enough to create the changes in instruction necessary to make dramatic improvements in student learning. Schools need opportunity, incentives, and tools to turn new expectations into results.

Accountability is the link between statewide standards and local school initiative. An accountability system must accomplish three tasks:

1) It must **attach consequences to performance** so schools have strong incentives to improve instruction.

2) It must **create flexibility at the school level** so that teachers and principals have the opportunity to make necessary staff and curricular decisions to improve instruction; and

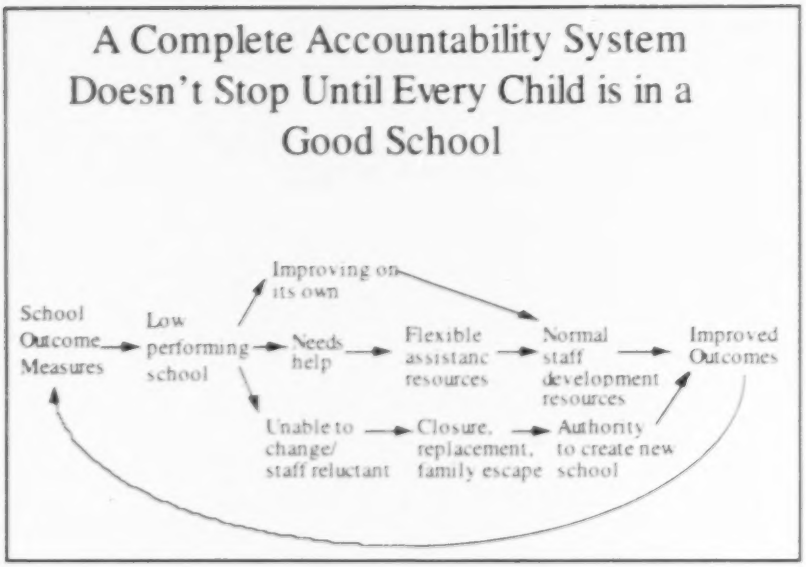
3) It must **help schools increase their own capacities** by investing in new ideas, new methods of instruction, and improved teacher training;

These three elements of an accountability system work together. The consequences side of accountability is the most familiar and the most obvious. For ten years, school improvement efforts have recognized that performance pressures in public education are too weak. In some places, schools can fail students for generations without being closed or fundamentally changed. It is also possible for teachers and principals, protected by civil service status, to continue working for a long time without doing a good job. Accountability is not supposed to expose teachers and schools to unnecessary or unsympathetic criticism, but it is supposed to make it clear that performance matters. It does so simply by emphasizing children's learning, rewarding schools and individuals that make a positive difference, and removing children from situations where they are not learning.

The flexibility side of accountability is equally important. Schools must be able to change in order to improve student learning, and that requires changes in what and how children are taught. Too often, however, teachers and principals feel that they are caught in a web of rules and spending constraints that does not allow them to innovate, create a coherent instructional strategy, or use their resources effectively. Schools need flexibility of two kinds: they need to be relieved of rules that limit and routinize instruction, and they need to be free to use money in creative ways. If schools are to be problem-solving organizations, they need freedom to find creative solutions to challenges and to spend money as they see fit. Some think schools will ultimately need more money, and they might. But the first thing they need is flexibility to use the money and talents they already have.

Finally, schools need to get help so they can increase their capacities. The dramatic student performance improvements sought by the state standards require expertise that few schools now have. Schools need access to a broad marketplace of resources in order to devise improvement strategies and assess their own progress. Many current teachers need to refresh their knowledge of their subject matter, and some need to upgrade their basic skills. New methods, books, computerized data bases, advice, and training will not become available spontaneously. They will require state, local, and private investment; and schools need to be able to choose and pay for the kinds of help that respond to their specific needs and problems.

Figure 2


A Complete Accountability System Doesn't Stop Until Every Child is in a Good School
School Outcome Measures
Low performing school
Improving on its own
Needs help
Flexible assistanc resources
Normal staff development resources
Improved Outcomes
Unable to change/ staff reluctant
Closure, replacement, family escape
Authority to create new school

This diagram illustrates two essential features of a good standards-based accountability system. First, it relies on school-level initiative. Even in the case of low-performing schools, a good accountability system relies on schools to manage their own improvement efforts, and it makes sure that schools that can improve with reasonable amounts of external help are able to get it. Higher-performing schools (not shown on diagram) are also expected to improve continuously on their own, and face real incentives for performance.

Second, a good accountability system provides a safety net for children in schools that cannot improve rapidly. As the diagram above demonstrates, three schools with the same low scores may need three different solutions. Everything depends on the school's ability to identify problems and to take aggressive action to improve instruction. Some schools are in a position to articulate their needs and then translate new resources into action that leads to improvement. But others may suffer from such profound discord that they are unable to unite on a line of action. The problem may go far beyond the influx of new resources or a change in school leadership. In some cases, no amount of peripheral changes will make a difference; and it may be necessary to close the school and reconstitute it with fresh leadership, staff, and purpose.

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II. Lessons from Other States on Design of an Accountability System[1]

- Locate freedom of action and responsibility at the school level
- Make sure struggling schools can get help
- Create a strong role for local school boards
- Provide an external check on the public school bureaucracy

Although only a few states have fully implemented a standards-based accountability system, Washington can learn from their experiences. The experience of Kentucky, Texas, Tennessee, Maryland, and other states that have been working to improve on their initial designs is valuable to consider.

1. Locate Freedom of Action and Responsibility at the School

Instructional improvement requires school control of resources and freedom of action. Texas initially tried to reward schools for success by granting freedom from regulations, but quickly recognized that struggling schools need freedom *in order* to improve, not after they do so. Texas has since granted schools and districts a high degree of flexibility by strengthening school-level decision making, reducing the state education code by half and passing charter school legislation.

States that have tried to dictate how teachers will teach and how schools will run have found that they have driven out the initiative and problem-solving that are necessary if children are to achieve at high levels. In a state with as much social, language, and ethnic diversity as Washington, no one approach can fit all schools or districts. On the other hand, reforms that create freedom of action at the school level encourage teacher initiative and responsibility. Washington's Schools for the 21st Century illustrate this point. Years after the program ended, many participating schools are still recognized as innovators.

Teachers and principals need to make decisions that matter -- about how to teach a subject, how to allocate time, and how to help struggling students. Fundamental improvements, such as must be made in schools where few students can meet state standards, can require major changes in school staffing, instructional materials, teacher training, and student assessment. Such changes are possible only when schools are relieved of regulation and have freedom to reallocate funds.

Today, Washington's education dollars are allocated to districts, not individual schools. Most districts in turn allocate resources to schools based on formulas that assume each school should receive a certain level of teacher, administrator, and support staff as well as textbooks, supplies, field trips, and other needs. To address equity issues, schools are allocated additional staff for federal or state compensatory education programs or specialized teaching staff to serve children with learning disabilities, low-income backgrounds and other special needs. These special-purpose or "categorical" funds are designated for specific programs and uses. Most schools have decision-making power over only a very small pot of remaining discretionary funds.

In addition to these restrictive funding regulations, school staffs are assigned within the confines of collective bargaining agreements, and decisions about instructional materials are often made at the

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[1] See Appendix for a matrix of five state accountability designs

district level. Individual schools also face endless state rules -- from teacher-student contact hour requirements to bicycle safety instruction -- that dictate how and what they teach. Taken individually, each of these regulations has merit. But together they add up to a diverse set of directives that are often not central to the central mission of a school.

As a result of this funding dependency and fragmentation of mission, schools tend to have little internal accountability among staff, students, and parents; nor do schools have common focus, agreed-on instructional philosophy and strategy. In such situations, teachers and principals understandably resist the accountability system, attacking the validity of tests on which performance is measured and claiming that dramatic change is impossible to achieve within the fiscal structures and regulations set by the state. If an accountability system is to stimulate earnest improvement efforts by teachers and principals, they must believe that instructional change is possible and that they are responsible for it.

2. Make Sure Struggling Schools Can Get Help

Struggling schools also must be able to get help. Some need advice and hands-on assistance improving their courses and instructional material, and many need help upgrading the skills of poorly-prepared or stagnant teachers. The help they get must be responsive to their problems. It must also be powerful enough to change the whole school, not just isolated parts of it, and applied consistently enough to make real improvements in teaching and learning.

School-assistance arrangements in most districts seldom meet any of these requirements. Schools commonly get help of two kinds: whatever advice of staff training they can get from small, overloaded state and local administrative offices; and one-shot seminars or consultant presentations that they can buy with the few thousand dollars that the principal controls. These kinds of help are seldom enough to turn a struggling school around.

In addition, individual teachers can take postgraduate courses for credit and get automatic pay raises from the school district. However, teacher-selected courses do not have to be linked to the schools needs or, for that matter, to the teachers' own instructional responsibilities. The result is that state and local funds spent on this form of teacher-training are often not assets for school-wide improvement.

Standards-based reform requires school performance improvements; and though some schools might be able to improve on their own, most need help. That is why the legislators who enacted ESHB 1209 considered assistance an integral part of the reform effort.

Assistance to struggling schools must have three characteristics: first, it must be school focused: if schools are to take responsibility for student learning and pursue consistent improvement strategies (and face the consequences of continued failure), they must be able to get help that responds to their specific problems and needs. A school whose big problem is students' math scores will not derive much benefit if this year's district-wide priorities focus on some other issue, e.g. parent involvement or conflict resolution. Second, assistance must be responsive: schools must be able to search out providers who have ideas and methods relevant to their specific problems, and who will engage the staff in a long-term problem-solving partnership. Third, assistance must be available when the school needs it: a school that must wait until a central office staff member can get around to them is deprived of help in the mean time. On the other hand, a school that can choose from among a number of competing providers is much more likely to get timely help.

Assistance therefore needs to come from many sources and in many forms. Because there is not a strong enough network of organizations that can work closely with struggling schools, an

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accountability system must include efforts to encourage the creation of a variety of responsive, capable assistance providers. To the degree possible, these providers must not enjoy monopolies or be able to put off requests while they serve squeaky wheels. They should compete, both for schools funds and in the marketplace of ideas.

3. Create a Strong Role for Local School Boards

Purely top-down solutions don't work in public education, especially in Washington where we place a premium on making decisions about our schools at the local level. The most effective and empowering management structure is one that encourages creative local solutions. Schools must be community institutions, not just government agencies, and they need locally-based help and support.

Some states (i.e., KY, TX, TN) have created a mainly state-run accountability system that makes judgments about schools, provides assistance resources, and administers rewards and sanctions, all from the central office. Such a centralized system is almost certainly destined to fail, as there is no incentive and little opportunity for local communities to participate fully in and take responsibility for the reform. Moreover, state education leaders are too distant from individual schools to know them well; state departments of education are too small to give help to all the schools that need it. These states have not been able to make "one size fits all" assistance programs into effective improvement strategies for a large number of schools.

Local school boards are in the best position to help schools and reflect community preferences. They must learn to play new roles, allocating real dollars to schools, and allowing school leaders to make fundamental decisions about instructional methods and staffing. They must become portfolio managers, encouraging school initiative and problem-solving while at the same time serving as safety nets for students whose schools have failed them.

4. Maintain an External Check on the System

State agencies and legislative committees have a tendency either to not take the reform seriously or to succumb to political pressure to weaken it. States that have vested oversight functions within state agencies or legislative committees have had difficulty keeping their reforms on track.

Under normal circumstances, teachers, administrators, and state agency officials will do what is required to improve schools. But it is inevitable that friendships and loyalties will make some officials reluctant to act aggressively to turn around a failing school. A statewide accountability system cannot depend on fortunate accidents. It must create structures and incentives that ensure accountability in the long run despite political and leadership changes.

A state accountability system requires an independent, single-purpose oversight body that:

- Is independent from implementors
- Has monitoring or oversight as a primary mission
- Represents members of public and private sectors as well as public school employees
- Has the power and authority to get people to pay attention
- Is not afraid to act.

III. Lessons from Other States on Measuring, Judging, Rewarding, and Sanctioning Schools

- Report direct measures of student learning
- Look beneath the numbers
- Reward schools for success and give schools help but don't tolerate continued poor performance

This section summarizes what we have learned from other states' experiences about the use of student test results and ways that school districts should deal with schools struggling to improve.

1. Report Direct Measures of Student Learning

Some states (TN, KY, TX) have tried to distill all the information about their schools into one number that reflects both the absolute performance of students and, through some weighting factors, reflect an estimate of the burden a school bears. This has two unacceptable consequences: it hides information about the real performance levels of students, and it creates numbers that no one can readily interpret. Stakeholders at every level must be able to easily understand on what basis schools are being held accountable. Without community-wide faith in the measures, the credibility of the entire accountability program is at risk. It is critical to consider the challenges schools face, especially in poverty areas; but an accountability program is useless if it obscures the understanding of student performance. Measurements must be transparent and simple.

An accountability system cannot give up on any student. Therefore, the state and districts should review the performance of all students, even special-education and bilingual students.

2. Look Beneath the Numbers

It is not realistic to drive rewards, consequences, or assistance to schools simply on the basis of numbers. Test results should be considered an indicator that triggers a closer look at a school. The key point is to look beneath the numbers and to ask what a pattern of numbers means. School classification should be driven by numbers but should leave room for judgment based on the school's needs, past performance, and ability to improve.

Though it is important to give real unweighted information about student and school performance, it is more important to match responses to the circumstances of a school. A school in a turbulent neighborhood or serving a challenging population needs and deserves a different response from state and district education agencies than a school in a stable area that has the same performance. A school whose staff members are steadily improving as is, similarly, differs from a school with the same performance levels that has been stagnant or falling. Finally, a school whose staff members and parents have agreed to a realistic and determined improvement strategy needs a different response than a school whose parents and staff cannot agree or have proven unable to follow a consistent line of action.

The ability to tailor responses to a school's needs requires more than numerical data; it requires school-specific knowledge and judgment. Performance designations should reflect both the school's absolute performance level and its ability to improve.

It's not enough for a school to make progress toward a goal. It must quickly reach an acceptable level of performance. Incentives should be built around the idea that improvement is valuable — and must be encouraged — but that interventions are necessary for a school that continues to have unsatisfactory performance levels.

3. Reward Successful Schools, Give Failing Schools Help but Don't Tolerate Poor Performance

Schools must take the initiative for their own improvement. The first line of accountability must be within the school, as teachers, administrators, and parents ask, "Are we doing the very best we can for the children?" But in making these demands of themselves schools must not struggle under unreasonable burdens or be deprived of funds, equipment, or access to good teachers because of adverse bargains made among adults.

A good accountability system considers whether a failing school has gotten a fair shake from district administration. The first move toward such a school must be to ensure its real-dollar per pupil funding represents its fair share and to answer the school's urgent requests for help. This is a district level responsibility. Again, districts must take the initiative to help their struggling schools. The state, however, must create consequences, positive and negative, to assure diligent work at the district level.

Schools must be considered teams in which no one person is wholly responsible for success or failure. Texas tried to create cash bonuses for principals, creating resentment among teaching staff who felt they were not being appreciated. Other states and localities have made principals' jobs contingent on improved performance but have not created similar consequences for teachers. Still others have tried to sanction individual teachers for low student test scores, sometimes placing blame where failure became evident, not where it first occurred. Such arrangements lead to internal divisions in schools, and to charges that the accountability system is arbitrary and unfair. If a school is to be held accountable for overall performance, all adults must have stakes in the results.

Limited state resources of dollars, people, and materials can stretch only so far. Spreading dollars widely so that each school gets only a very small amount of help is not an effective strategy. It leads to tinkering around the edges rather than solving real problems. Instead, every school should continue receiving access to routine professional development funding. But state resources should be accumulated and targeted on a limited, strategic school-by-school basis. Struggling schools should get very substantial assistance on a short-term basis: the idea is a great deal of help over a concentrated period of time, not a very small amount of help over many years. Assistance must be temporary and powerful.

Help to struggling schools must not be limited by capacities of state or district staff. A broad market-place of alternatives is needed.

IV. Recommendations: A System Design for Washington State

An Accountability System in Washington State Should Have Several Key Elements:

⇒ **Schools should have real decision-making power and flexibility**

⇒ **School districts should be responsible for providing rewards, assistance, interventions**

⇒ **Schools should have access to new forms of assistance, from many sources**

⇒ **The Superintendent of Public Instruction should oversee the reform**

⇒ **An independent statewide accountability commission should set school performance standards and serve as a check on school districts and the OSPI**

⇒ **Teachers and administrators should be free to hold students accountable for diligent effort and reasonable behavior**

This final section explains how a locally administered incentive system overseen by an independent statewide accountability commission would work.

This section also underscores a point made at the beginning of this paper: An accountability system truly intended to improve Washington's schools requires deep changes in the roles of everyone in the public education system, from the OSPI to individual teachers and students.

⇒ Schools should have real decision-making power.

- Receive dollars, not resources
- Have power to hire and purchase in line with improvement strategies
- Be freed from burdensome, fragmented curricular and program requirements
- Have flexible staff development funds

In return for being held accountable for performance, schools should have control of money — not the few discretionary dollars principals are now allocated, but all of the dollars required to pay teachers, buy instructional materials, hire consultants, and purchase help from universities, school-design organizations, and vendors. Schools should be free to hire teachers who have the skills necessary to help the school improve, and who will cooperate with the school's improvement strategies.

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The state should also allow schools to use the maximum flexibility for state and federal funding. Budget flexibility is necessary to create real freedom of action and allow schools and districts the flexibility they need to make dramatic improvements in their programs. To stimulate demand for appropriate assistance and to create a more efficient use of dollars at the site level, schools must have the "power of the purse." Some districts in Washington such as Seattle and Moses Lake are moving in this direction by allocating funds on a per pupil basis. In other states, districts have experimented with giving schools control of as much as 50 percent of their budget. Charter schools can control as much as 95 percent of state education dollars.

Schools must be relieved of the myriad process requirements established by the state code and agency regulations. It is unfair to burden schools with more outcome requirements without freeing them from paperwork and process requirements now required under law. But current efforts to deregulate schools are insufficient. The Joint Commission on Educational Restructuring established in ESHB 1209 failed to make any real progress toward school autonomy. Granting waivers on request is insufficient.

Washington must take deregulation seriously. Eliminating all laws and regulations aside from those that are performance-based and those that relate to health, safety, and civil rights could be accomplished by sunsetting the entire education code. This would put the burden of proof on those who propose additions. New legal arrangements for schools such as a charter school law would also help accomplish this goal.

Finally, the state should consolidate and de-regulate its own programs, especially those like the Student Learning Improvement Grants that fund staff-development and other improvement programs. These funds should be pooled and allocated to school districts, for allocation on a cash basis to schools. School districts should also be encouraged to pool the funds now spent for teacher release time and salary-point credits (automatic raises to teachers who win credits in postgraduate institutions), and add them to the amounts available for cash-based allocation to schools. All schools should have some claim on these funds, but low-performing schools should receive the lion's share to support emergency improvement efforts. As discussed below, extra funding will not be a permanent entitlement since low-performing schools that cannot improve will be reconstituted.

Pooling funds from these state and local sources will release hundreds of millions of dollars[2] each year for schoolwide improvement efforts. In the short run, until it is clear how much effective use of these funds can accomplish, no additional state funding should be needed.

⇒ School Boards should be responsible for providing rewards, sanctions and assistance.

- Create their own local programs for recognizing or rewarding excellence
- Identify schools in need of help or stronger measures
- Ensure that troubled schools have fair shares or real-dollar per pupil funding
- Approve schools' resource and performance plans, and administer rewards and sanctions
- Provide flexibility and help as specified in school plans
- Replace or reconstitute schools that cannot make plausible resource and performance plans
- Be held accountable for improving their schools

[2] source: Financing Quality Child Care in Washington, Human Services Policy Center, UW 1997

Local school boards should administer their own local reward programs. Although we do not endorse large new expenditures for cash awards, we do believe the state has a responsibility to set aside some funds to allow districts to reward a small number of schools each year.

Districts might also reward exemplary individuals and schools through opportunities to assist other individuals and schools for increased pay. All schools should also get the benefit of greater control of their funds and access to a richer supply of assistance options. Educators should have the opportunity to work as mentors during summer and other times to increase their incomes. Also, people who run highly successful schools might be given opportunities to reconstitute and run schools elsewhere.

The most challenging responsibility for school districts is to help improve schools in which few students can meet student performance standards. This is not a new responsibility for school districts, but the proposed accountability system introduces many important changes. Districts will have far better measures of student and school performance than ever before; they will be expected to address the problems of schools individually, rather than through district-wide mandates, and to enable schools to manage their own improvement efforts whenever possible.

A district's work with a low-performing school will start the first time the OSPI publishes school performance data. All schools whose students perform below a threshold level set by the legislature will be considered low-performing. A district will be required to analyze the needs and recent progress of each of its low-performing schools and determine whether each should be labeled "capable of gains" or "failed."

Districts will surely want to work with their schools. But districts might decide that a few schools are incapable of improvement, due to lack of staff skills or conflict within the school community. Should a district decide a school must be labeled "failed," the district will be responsible to provide alternatives for students as soon as possible -- by starting new schools, re-building new school organizations from the ground up, or releasing families to find school placements in schools run by other districts or other organizations.

With low-performing schools labeled "capable of gains," districts will initiate discussion about short-and long-term improvement options. Within three months of OSPI's publication of test scores, the districts will enter into a **resource and performance agreement** with each such school. This agreement will detail the school's improvement plans, the levels of extra funds and other help the district intends to make available, and the student performance levels the school expects to reach within one year.

Forging the resource and performance agreement will be the district's best opportunity to help a school improve. The district can offer advice and services from central office experts, and can steer struggling teachers and principals toward others in the district who have related ideas and experience. The district can also help a school find an independent assistance source that meets its needs -- whether the school needs staff re-training, new instructional materials or technology, or hands-on leadership. The school and the district will be united in their desire to find the most appropriate assistance, and neither should be limited to what district and state employees can provide.

As districts that have succeeded in turning around low-performing schools have found, finding and creating new forms and sources of assistance is indispensable. It is safe to say that there are now not enough good sources of help to serve every school. However, a state reform that puts money in the hands of schools can, as it has elsewhere, stimulate a supply of assistance providers driven by competition to respond to schools needs.

When negotiating a school's performance and resource plan, the district must also consider whether the school has received a fair share of resources in the past. Though Washington's district funding formula is more equitable than most states', there can be great disparities in the way resources are distributed to individual schools within districts. In some districts, certain schools have far fewer experienced and well-paid teachers than others, due to placement of high-seniority teachers in the more affluent schools.

Districts and schools will have strong incentives to take their resource and performance agreements seriously; a school that does not implement its plan or whose student performance does not improve can be labeled a "failed" school the next time OSPI publishes student achievement results. A district that endorses large numbers of resource and performance agreements that are not implemented or fail to produce the expected results can also have its schools -- and the district structure itself including the job slots of board members and central administrators -- reconstituted by OSPI.

These events should be rare; ideally they should not happen at all. The goal of the accountability system is to create earnest and open work at the local level, not to create opportunities for state intervention. Though the great majority of district boards and officials can be expected to take their new responsibilities seriously, some may not. It will be tempting for some local boards or administrators to accept incomplete resource and performance plans from schools where staff are trying hard, or that have bases of local political support. Similarly, some may be tempted to gloss over the failure of a school that had followed a course of action the local board itself thought was promising. Local boards need room to work with their schools, try out approaches, abandon those that do not work, and try again. But because the futures of children are at stake, local boards must operate under strong incentives against obfuscation of real performance levels or misguided leniency.

⇒ The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction should oversee the reform.

- Set performance goals and minimum performance levels below which schools must be considered low-performing
- Monitor school scores and district interventions
- Stimulate assistance resources
- Act as a clearinghouse for information and best practices
- Reconstitute failed schools and low performing districts

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction will administer the state testing program and report results on a school-by school basis. OSPI will also be charged with monitoring school and district progress toward state performance goals. As discussed above, Washington must be sure the information it gives parents, teachers, and the public is simple and transparently meaningful. School performance reports should be detailed enough to provide an accurate profile of a school's record. They also must clearly convey student proficiency in meeting state standards and how the school compares with schools of similar demographic characteristics.

OSPI will also identify districts in which low-performing schools that have either not implemented their resource and performance agreements, or have failed to show improvement. OSPI can inform a district of its intention to reconstitute a school or district, and depending on local response, either negotiate remedial action or proceed with reconstitution. The OSPI should intervene only when it is

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clear that a district is unwilling or unable to do whatever is necessary to ensure that its schools improve.

The OSPI should also be responsible for ensuring that schools and districts have access to a wide range of assistance options. Because it is unreasonable to expect that the state could provide all assistance resources, the OSPI should also have a clear responsibility to stimulate creation of new school assistance organizations in school districts, teachers' unions, colleges and universities, non-profit organizations, foundations, and private firms.

⇒ Schools should have access to new forms of assistance and from many sources.

Different schools need different kinds of help. Some need only occasional advice about improving teaching methods or updating instructional materials. Others need extensive hands-on help overhauling their curricula, strengthening leadership, or re-training teachers who have seriously deficient skills. Many schools will need help learning how to use information about student performance as the starting-point for instructional improvement. As in Kentucky and Maryland, some schools might benefit from hands-on advice from distinguished educators who work as "turn-around specialists." Some schools will need such complete overhaul that only a renewed mission and a new "design" (i.e. a plan for integrating all elements of the school around a specific approach to instruction, complete with related instructional materials and staff training) can produce needed performance increases. Education reform networks such as Success for All, New American Schools, and Accelerated Schools have shown promising results in turning around struggling schools.[3]

A school that has real decision-making power as discussed above is in a position to select and pay for the kind of assistance it needs. A school that selects and pays for assistance clearly has the initiative for self-improvement and can be fairly held accountable for performance.

The principle that schools can choose the help they need implies that schools must have choices. They must not be limited to the range of assistance capabilities present in permanent district office staff or in the OSPI. Schools must be able to choose and hire assistance from many sources, including their own school districts (and school districts other than their own) from OSPI, Educational Service Districts, state and private colleges and universities, not-profit assistance providers, and profit-making firms.

Under the current system, schools' choices and the range of possible providers are limited. If schools have money to spend, a new marketplace of provider organizations will surely arise. Many new providers will seek to meet the needs of low-performing schools which, as discussed above, should receive the lion's share of state and district assistance resources.

OSPI's most important new responsibility should be oversight of districts' efforts to improve their schools. OSPI should help districts in any way it can, but it will also have an affirmative duty to stimulate the emergence of a market of assistance providers and ensure that districts do not limit schools' choices to whatever local school district staff can provide.

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[3] For a more expanded discussion of school networks, see A Policymaker's Guide to Education Reform Networks, Education Commission of the States 1997.

For schools that cannot improve with help, or districts that will not give their schools a chance to improve, OSPI should have the power to use charter or contracting mechanisms, or re-create schools after declaring all staff positions vacant. It should also be able to reconstitute a district. OSPI should take these actions on its own initiative or on the recommendation of the independent state accountability commission.

⇒ An Independent Statewide Commission should keep the system in check.

- Recommend school performance goals
- Assess districts' performance in improving schools
- Recommend reconstitution of failing districts and schools
- Provide an independent overview of district and state performance

An independent accountability commission should have both public and private sector members. It should include, but not be dominated by teachers and school administrators. The commission members should have staggered five-year terms, and should be appointed by the governor and approved by the legislature.

With the approval of the legislature, an independent accountability commission will be responsible to recommend, after consultation with stakeholder groups, two kinds of goals for the state's schools: first, an average percentage increase in scores that will be a goal for every school in the state; and second, a minimum percentage of students meeting grade-appropriate standards, below which a school will be considered "low performing." It will submit the proposed quantitative goals to the legislature once each year, and the proposal will become law within thirty days unless the legislature formally amends it.

Though the state and local districts would perform most of the oversight roles, the commission would make three additions. First, the commission would assess school districts' performance and call public attention to exemplary schools as well as low-performing schools that failed to improve with the help offered by its district. Second, the commission could recommend that the OSPI intervene on behalf of the students in such schools via reconstitution. Third, the commission would provide a critical link to help parents and other community members understand school ratings and the accountability process.

Establishing a statewide accountability commission would emphasize that improving school performance is everybody's business. A powerful statewide commission is a safety measure. Its existence might encourage educators to act more quickly and aggressively on behalf of children in weak schools. It is also a final protector for children whose schools and districts will not act.

An independent commission focused solely on public school accountability would insulate the accountability system from politics and stabilize the expectations under which schools and local districts must work.

This is a new state function and it might be assigned to the State Board of Education. However, the current State Board in Washington is elected by local school districts and cannot provide the needed independent check on the system. The State Board could become an independent accountability commission, however, if its powers, membership, mode of appointment, and terms of service were changed as suggested above and its current responsibilities shifted to the OSPI.

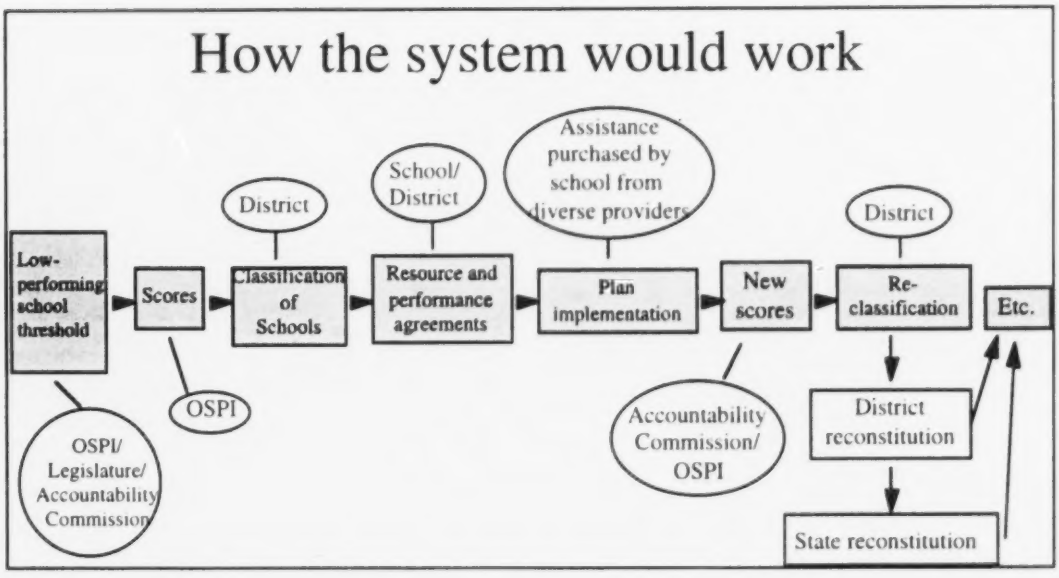
As the 1997 Conditions of Education in Washington State reports, "Washington has evolved an educational governance system in which responsibility for formulating, funding, and implementing policy is blurred, fragmented, and sometimes overlapping," and "No one person is in charge of or accountable for education in Washington State... A more streamlined and less complicated approach to educational governance and decision making should be considered." However oversight roles are assigned, the primary goal should be achieve clear roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability throughout the governance system.

⇒ Teachers and administrators should be free to hold students accountable for diligent effort and reasonable behavior.

Finally, schools must be free to tell students and parents what kinds of effort, attendance, and behavior are necessary to succeed in the school. No flexibility rules can exempt public schools from the obligation to serve students of all income levels and ethnic groups, and public schools cannot expel students who will attend, try, and behave in ways that do not disrupt the education of others. However, if schools are to be held accountable for others, they must be free to uphold minimum standards of diligence on the parts of parents and students. School districts will have to create clear rules for student transfer, and larger districts might have to continue providing alternative schools designed to serve students who cannot or will not meet normal requirements for effort and behavior. These schools, if properly designed, can be successful in helping many students adjust their habits so they can succeed in regular schools. Such schools can also be held accountable for their success in re-connecting students with their educational opportunities. Private contractors are willing to run such schools and promise results. Competition between such schools and publicly-run schools can help set reasonable baselines of performance.

A strong system of accountability requires responsible behavior from everyone, and it does not shield anyone from the consequences of their own actions. Students must be given many chances to succeed, but that does not mean that schools struggling to meet standards should bear the burden of some students' unwillingness to attend school, do work fairly assigned, or respect the learning opportunities of others.

Table 1



The foregoing diagram summarizes our proposed accountability process. The process starts with actions now being taken by the Commission on Student Learning — establishing student learning goals, designing tests of student performance, and testing students in every school in the state. Once these actions are taken, the following events would ensue:

- Independent accountability commission recommends school performance goals
- OSPI reports unadjusted scores for all schools to the public.
- Local school districts classify schools as "exemplary", "stable", "capable of gains", and "failed".
- Low-performing schools negotiate resource and performance agreements with their local school boards.
- Schools implement their resource and performance agreements. Schools use funds, including special moneys provided by the district as specified in the school's performance and resource plan, to purchase assistance.
- The local school board continuously monitors schools' implementation.
- Local school boards can close and reconstitute any school that cannot quickly create a plausible resource and performance plan, whose plan cannot result in improvement, or that has not implemented its plan.
- Every year, OSPI supervises testing of students and issues new school-by-school score reports. Local school boards re-classify schools and work with the staffs of low-performing schools to update or develop new resource and improvement plans.
- The independent state accountability commission reviews the results of low-performing schools and can review the overall performance of any district where large numbers of schools have not improved.

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- In the case of districts that are unable to help their schools improve, OSPI is empowered to order reconstitution of any school whose plan would not result in improvement, had not implemented its plan, or had been neglected by its local district.
- The independent accountability commission could make a public recommendation that OSPI reconstitute a district that has failed to create effective plans for improvement of its low-performing schools. District reconstitution includes vacating all board seats and central office positions. OSPI could order new board elections and the new board would hire all administrative staff.

School and district reconstitution are last-ditch actions that districts, OSPI, and the independent state accountability commission will take only with reluctance. In other states, these actions are rare but not unprecedented. New Jersey, Texas, Maryland, and Ohio have all initiated reconstitution of some schools, districts, or both. The possibility of such dramatic actions underscores the state's determination to make sure that no child or parent must suffer a failing school without recourse to powerful help.

The following table summarizes the responsibilities and powers of key actors in the accountability system.

Table 2

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES HAVE CLEARER ROLES AND REAL POWERS

	Roles	Powers
Governor and Legislature	Provide stable funding for testing, for State Commission, and assistance capabilities	Appoint accountability commission, set testing and assistance budgets, approve school performance standards
State Superintendent of Instruction	Conduct testing program, report results, create responsive assistance capabilities	Invest in assistance providers, order reconstitution of failed schools, replace school boards that do not act to improve schools
Independent Accountability Commission	Oversee school districts' work with low-performing schools	Recommend school performance goals, identify schools that have not improved under district management, request OSPI orders to reconstitute failed schools or replace non-performing local boards
Local School Boards	Identify schools needing urgent improvement, distribute fair share of per-pupil funding, give schools control of spending, designate schools to get extra resources, provide options for students who disrupt or will not work in schools	Enter performance agreements with schools, create or find assistance resources needed by schools, reward successful schools, reconstitute schools that do not improve
Schools	Create and execute improvement plans, choose whole-school models, publish annual self-assessment report	Purchase assistance, hire and evaluate staff, set student attendance and effort requirements

V. Conclusion:

Washington can have a statewide accountability and governance system that:

- Is driven by measurements of student performance and incentives to improve
- Creates clear lines of responsibility
- Gives every school a chance to perform and improve
- Employs powerful incentives
- Doesn't stop until every child is in a good school

This report has sketched a strong and unique accountability system for Washington State. It meets the standard that all education reform efforts must meet, the "Are we serious test": Are we serious enough to make public real measures of student performance, free of adjustments that shield some schools and school districts from embarrassment? Are we serious enough to create a system in which all actors have clear responsibilities and no one can shrink from acknowledging the connections between their efforts and student achievement? Are we serious enough to reject meaningless slogans in favor of a clear-eyed look at what our schools need if they are to perform? Are we serious enough not to let any adult off the hook until every child has a chance to attend a good school?

A system that massages numbers to hide discrepancies in performance, or places some children at risk of failure because it fears making demands on adults, is not serious. Nor is a system based on the slogan, "Everyone is responsible for student achievement," without also saying who is responsible for what, and with what consequences.

We have suggested a system in which the whole community, including business and private sector assistance providers has a role in improving Washington's schools. Others will have their own ideas; but this plan and any alternatives must be measured against the standards suggested above.

Appendix: Five State Accountability Designs:

	TX	KY	MD	SC	TN
Who is held accountable?	• schools • districts	• schools • districts	• schools • districts	• schools • districts	• teachers • schools • districts
How is progress determined?	-distance from standard -comparable improvement	distance from school goal set by state	distance from standard	-level of achievement -gain in achievement	-distance from standard -gain in achievement
What are the indicators?	-test results -attendance -drop-out rate	-test results -attendance -drop-out rates -retention -transition to work/college	-test results -attendance -drop-out rate	test results	-value-added test -attendance -promotion rate -drop-out rate
Rewards	-cash to principals -waivers from regulations -public recognition	-cash to schools -public recognition	-cash to schools	-cash to schools and districts	-cash awards to schools (principal decides use) -public recognition
Possible Consequences	-parent choice -public hearings -school reconstitution -district reconstitution/ annexation	-parent escape -loss of teacher tenure -transfer/ dismissal of school staff -district takeover	-school reconstitution -district takeover	-audit teams -district takeover	-probation -district takeover
What type of assistance offered?	-peer audit teams	-regional service centers -peer assistance for one year -planning money	none specified	-external review teams -district partnerships for technical assistance	Dept. of Ed provides assistance for one year
How much freedom of action allowed?	HIGH -strong school-based decision making (SBDM) -revamped ed. code -charter schools	MEDIUM -site councils have control over principal, staff, learning environment	LOW-MED -some SBDM	LOW -voluntary SBDM	LOW-MED -some SBDM

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The previous chart shows a sampling of the ways in which five states have constructed their accountability systems. Each of the five states holds individual schools as well as districts accountable for student achievement. Test results are the primary indicator used to assess progress in all five states. Many, however, also consider attendance and drop-out rates as indicators of school progress. These indicators are sometimes used to calculate rewards and sanctions and are sometimes reported only. These states take very different approaches to calculating progress. Some (Kentucky and Maryland) expect schools to meet a standard or goal. South Carolina, Texas and Tennessee consider distance from a standard or goal as well as rate of improvement when they calculate progress. Texas considers rate of improvement against schools with similar demographic characteristics. All of these states, with the exception of Maryland, use highly complex indices to calculate school progress.

Though individual districts within many of these states have instituted teacher accountability programs, only Tennessee also attempts to account for the performance of individual teachers at the state level.

These states take very similar approaches to rewards. Most states offer some sort of cash award to successful schools and in one case, districts. They differ mainly in the amount of the award and in how the money can be spent. Most states allocate state money to individual schools and allow staffs to decide how the bonuses will be used. Texas gives cash awards directly to principals for personal use and rewards successful schools with freedom from district regulations. In many states, public recognition for exceptional school performance is also considered a significant reward.

Sanctions programs are more divergent. Nearly all of the five states will take over or reconstitute consistently failing schools and districts. But states like Texas and Kentucky offer a wide range of interventions that occur before takeover or reconstitution, such as public hearings, parent escape and loss of teacher tenure.

Assistance to struggling schools is not particularly well developed in any of these states. Of the five states, Kentucky has the broadest range of assistance mechanisms, providing planning money to schools, a "distinguished educator" program that assigns successful teachers and principals to low-performing schools for up to a year, and regional service centers that offer technical assistance. Some states (Maryland, Tennessee) have made only cursory attempts to provide more effective assistance resources to schools.

School level flexibility is probably the most often ignored component in state accountability systems, though most acknowledge its importance. Site-level management was not a major part of the original Texas accountability plan. But recently, the state has passed new laws that significantly increase the autonomy of district schools and create the option of an unlimited number of charter schools for disadvantaged children.

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